Himalayan Spy Device Said to Pose No Radiation Risk

The threat of escaped radiation posed by a U.S. plutonium-powered spy device that was lost in the Himalayas in 1965 is "negligibly small in magnitude and should not be a matter for alarm," according to a committee of scientists appointed by the Indian government to look into the affair.

Fears of radioactive contamination had been raised in April 1978 when Prime Minister Morarji R. Desai of India confirmed for the first time that an India-United States intelligence team had lost the device in a snow storm. The American-made device, which weighed 38 pounds and had a power pack containing 3.8 pounds of plutonium 238, was to record atomic explosions and rocket operations in China. At the time, in the mid-1960's, India had just fought a war with China, and both India and the United States were deeply suspicious of the Chinese, who had exploded an atomic device in Sinkiang Province in October 1964.

The spy device was to have been placed atop 25,645-foot Nanda Devi, one of India's highest peaks, but a blizzard forced members of the intelligence team to retreat. They left the device 2000 feet short of the summit, and when they returned the following spring, they found it had been buried or swept away by an avalanche. Ground and helicopter searches made in warmer weather during the next 3 years failed to find any trace of the device.

The loss was kept secret until April 1978, when a report in *Outside*, a publication of the American magazine *Rolling Stone*, claimed that a Central Intelligence Agency mountaineering team had abandoned the device. A storm of protest was immediately raised in New Delhi, not only for ecological and political reasons, but also because there was fear that radioactive runoff would pollute the sacred Ganges River. The United States Ambassador, Robert F. Goheen, was summoned to the foreign ministry and asked "to ascertain the truth as early as possible." Soon afterward, however, Indian Prime Minister Desai admitted that his government had been fully consulted on the mission at the time, and that it had been undertaken after joint consultations between the two governments "at the highest level." He also said that a similar device had been successfully installed in a neighboring mountain in 1967, presumably also to spy on China, but was removed a year later. At the time of these disclosures, Desai ordered a nine-member committee to study possible radiation hazards posed by the lost device.

That report, presented to both Houses of the Indian Parliament on 18 May by Desai, suggested that there should be continuing monitoring for radioactivity and that efforts to recover the device should be pursued. It noted, however, "that whether the device has fallen on glacier ice or is buried under rock, it may result at most in local contamination of soil and is not likely to present any significant contamination problems for water and air."

Science Museums Panned for Pushing Industry Line

Near the end of the "Electricity and Our Future" exhibit at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry stands a question and answer machine that makes sure visitors have paid attention and learned their lessons. With flashing lights and illuminated signs, it offers to "Test Your Energy IQ." Attaining the title of "Energy Genius" is a snap. One simply answers that nuclear power plants are "non-polluting," have caused "no injury to the public," are "more safe than conventional plants," and can "generate energy at a lower cost than coal or oil." Variations on this pro-nuclear theme are found all over the "Electricity and Our Future" exhibit—at the expense of other energy sources. Geothermal power is dubbed as "polluting." Wind power is "not economical." And solar power is "still costly." According to glittering panels and a dozen shiny display units, the only promising alternative to fossil fuels is nuclear fission.

The exhibit, if you haven't guessed by now, is sponsored by Commonwealth Edison, a Chicago utility that operates seven nuclear power plants, is constructing six others, and has two more on the drawing board. And not everyone is happy that a public museum is pushing an industry line. "The utility's intent is clear," says Howard Learner, a Harvard law student who recently completed a 6-month study of science museums for the Washington-based Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). "Besieged by adverse publicity over the dangers and high costs of its nuclear power plants, Commonwealth Edison is out to present a lavish tribute to the untarnished glories of nuclear power, rather than a legitimate educational program concerning electricity and energy." It's not right, says Learner in CSPI's recently released *White Paper on Science Museums*. In 1978 the Chicago museum received some $2.2 million in taxpayer support. With that kind of backing, says Learner, it should deliver more than industry fluff on energy.

The problem is not limited to a particular exhibit or to Chicago, according to the *White Paper*. It sharply criticizes science museums in Boston, Los Angeles, and Detroit for their "blind acceptance of corporate donations." At the California Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles, for instance, an exhibit tells visitors about great progress in cleaning up air pollution in Los Angeles County. It was donated by General Motors. Even the Smithsonian, the federally supported museum complex in Washington, does not escape criticism. Several displays, such as cars donated by the STP Corporation and an illuminated map donated by AT & T were criticized as having to do more with advertising than with education.

Tight budgets were pointed to by the report as one reason that science museums were such easy marks for industry-sponsored exhibits. Rather than scorning corporate support, however, the *White Paper* says that museums should encourage corporations to give general donations (which are tax deductible for up to 5 percent of pre-tax profits) rather than supporting specific exhibits.

Critics of the CSPI *White Paper* say the idea is nothing but a pipe dream. They note, for instance, that in the past, corporations have never given

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